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On a Long Neglected Player: The Religious Factor in Poverty Alleviation –

The Example of the So-Called "Prosperity Gospel" in Africa

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Abstract

Much of poverty alleviation theory and practice fails to sufficiently consider the following crucial factor: the religious dimension. This paper elaborates this thesis by focusing on the African context and the valuable resources African religious communities and movements can provide in the struggle against poverty. One particularly influential streak of present-time African religiousness serves as a case study: the so-called "Prosperity Gospel" as part of Pentecostal Christianity. The author *first* argues for the continuing formative influence of religion on African conceptions of self, other and world. *Secondly*, she provides a critical assessment of the impact of Pentecostalism and the "Prosperity Gospel" on poverty alleviation. In comparison with secular NGOs, Pentecostal churches emerge as the more effective agents of change. A *third* part situates the insights gained into a wider perspective, seeking ways to integrate the religious factor into a more holistic conception of and engagement against poverty.

Keywords

Poverty Alleviation, African Christianity, Prosperity Gospel, Pentecostalism, African Traditional Religions, NGOs, Development

1. Introduction

Framed in the aftermath of the UN Millennium Assembly in the year 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) gave hope to achieving a dramatic reduction of poverty until 2015.[1] Right before the deadline, however, one cannot deny the glaring gap between the millennium goals and reality. In the following, I will argue that many attempts in poverty alleviation theory and practice aimed to implement the MDGs have been seriously hindered by

[1] http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/. Last access September 25, 2014.

neglecting the following crucial factor: the religious dimension. I will elaborate this thesis by focusing on the African context and the valuable resources African religious communities and movements can provide in the struggle against poverty. One particularly influential streak of present-time African religiousness serves as a case study: the so-called "Prosperity Gospel" as part of Pentecostal Christianity. With currently "approximately 9 million new members per year – 25,000 a day – ,"[2] it is "at present (not only) in Africa, … possibly the most dynamic religious mass movement."[3]

This paper is structured into three parts: *First*, a brief outline of the continuing formative influence of religion on African conceptions of self, other, and world and its impact on the perception of poverty is provided. This is, *secondly*, followed by a critical assessment of the conceptual and practical impact of the "Prosperity Gospel" on concrete and effective poverty alleviation. A comparison with the work of secular NGOs reveals Pentecostal churches as the more effective agents of change. A *third* part situates the insights gained into a wider perspective, seeking ways to integrate the religious factor into a more holistic conception of and engagement against poverty.

2. Religion and Poverty: Traditional African Perspectives

The choice of Africa as a reference point is due to the fact that it is the world's poorest continent. According to the UN Human Development Index (HDI), 24 of the 30 countries with the lowest HDI ranking are located in Africa, making it thus a primary target for poverty alleviation.[4] Any strategy for poverty alleviation must, as Kenyan theologian Esther M. Mombo argues "of necessity be related to a particular context and … it must be comprehensively construed in

[2] D. Freeman, 'The Pentecostal Ethic and the Spirit of Development,' in: D. Freeman (ed.), *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, 1-38, 11.
[3] A. Heuser, ''Refuse to Die in Poverty!' Armutsüberwindung und Varianten des Wohlstandsevangeliums in Afrika,' *Theologische Zeitschrift* 69 (2013), 146-171, 155. Translations are mine, if not indicated otherwise.
[4] In 2012, the eight poorest countries world-wide were all located in Africa. http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/table-2-human-development-index-trends-1980-2013#a. Last access September 25, 2014.

relation to the diversity of factors that impact on the totality of human existence."[5] In the case of Africa, this includes the religious dimension. Due to its pervasiveness that permeates all spheres of life in Africa, religion emerges as a central – though gravely neglected[6] – factor in poverty alleviation in this context. While the infinite diversity and complexity of the African continent defies any simplistic generalizations, there are nevertheless certain characteristics common throughout the continent that foster a certain unity in diversity.[7] As African-American theologian Peter Paris points out, this commonality not only includes the collective memory of negative experiences such as the slave trade, colonial oppression, and poverty, but also contains "basic moral and religious values widely shared by African people" arising "from their common understandings of the interrelatedness of God, community, family, and personhood."[8]

In order to gain a more thorough understanding of the religious dimension and its formative influence on African perspectives on "God, community, family, and personhood," which in turn shape the perception of poverty,[9] it is helpful *first* to turn briefly to key concepts of African traditional religion in as far as they pertain to poverty. From these emerge, *second*, fundamental aspects of how poverty is perceived. *Third*, I will turn to traditional religion-inspired African strategies for combatting poverty.

1. Key concepts in traditional African religions. Contrary to the post-Enlightenment Western perception that commonly relegates religion to the private sphere, religion in the traditional African worldview is all-encompassing, i.e. it is affecting all of life's dimensions. For African

[5] E.M. Mombo, 'Religion and Materiality. The Case of Poverty Alleviation,' in: P.J. Paris (ed.), *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives*, Durham: Duke University Press 2009, 213-227, 219.

[6] This holds true for the "post-development pursuit of 'alternatives to development'" as well, for it too has "overlooked religion." R. van Dijk, 'Pentecostalism and Post-Development: Exploring Religion as a Developmental Ideology in Ghanaian Migrant Communities,' in: D. Freeman (ed.), *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, 87-108, 103.

[7] In order to pay heed to the immense diversity and complexity of the African continent, this paper seeks to integrate voices from different African countries and regions.

[8] P.J. Paris, 'Introduction,' in: P.J. Paris (ed.), *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives*, Durham: Duke University Press 2009, 1-16, 5. Cf. P.J. Paris, *Virtues and Values: The African and African American Experience*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press 2004.

[9] For a thorough introduction into African religious world-views, cf. T. Sundermeier, *Nur gemeinsam können wir leben. Das Menschenbild schwarzafrikanischer Religionen*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1990.

traditional religion, the concept of well-being emerges as the overall guiding category. As Ghanaian religionist Elizabeth Amoah argues "African traditional religion focuses on wholeness, the well-being of people, and the community at large. … Well-being as seen in this sense has both external (material) and internal (psychological and spiritual) dimensions."[10] With poverty being detrimental to both external and internal well-being, it is of direct concern to religion. Further aspects include the belief in a "community of spirit powers" that constitutes a reciprocal relationship between humans and spirits, resulting in a merging of the sacred and the secular. Poverty, therefore, has both a spiritual and a material dimension as evil spirits are held responsible and need to be appeased by rituals or other social practices. Another element is the interconnectedness of humans with one another and with their environment due to their common sacred source. From this interconnectedness arises the duty to help the poor. In addition, the concept of the ancestors needs to be mentioned, who are regarded as the custodians of the land and other natural resources. Consequently, the land cannot and must not be sold, but left for the benefit of the entire community.

2. Perceptions of poverty. I will utilize African oral tradition as exemplified in Ghanaian proverbs in order to explore key concepts representative of African perceptions of poverty.[11] Poverty is regarded as "evil and undesirable"[12] and includes the reduction to animal status and the loss of human dignity ("If you are poor you eat from the dung heap"),[13] the loss of personhood ("The poor person has no right to be angry"),[14] isolation and loss of community ("The poor person has no friend").[15] Despite its severity, poverty is seen as a temporary

[10] E. Amoah, 'African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty,' in: P.J. Paris (ed.), *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives*, Durham: Duke University Press 2009, 111-127, 111.
[11] I rely here on the study conducted by Elizabeth Amoah based on J.G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1935. Amoah, 116ff. Amoah argues that despite the proverbs' specific *Sitz im Leben* in the Ghanaian context, they nevertheless reveal aspects of poverty representative of many African perspectives.
[12] *Ohia ye musu*.
[13] *Chia wu a na wurwe sumina-due*.
[14] *Ohiani bu mfu*.
[15] *Ohiani nni yonko*.

condition ("You should not die when you become poor"),[16] for there is always hope in the traditional social systems on which poor people can rely. It is noteworthy that while the lack of material goods ("If you are poor you eat goat's skin")[17] is one aspect of poverty, it is far from being the dominating aspect. Other aspects like the loss of community and dignity seem to play an even greater role. Here, considerable "differences between Western and African understandings on poverty" come into view as "many Africans who possess very little money or property do not consider themselves poor. Rather, they view alienation from families, friends, and communities as the state of true poverty, the intensity of which is increased by the lack of religious faith."[18]

3. Resources for combatting poverty based on traditional religion. African traditional religions not only significantly shape the African perception of poverty, but also facilitate resources in the struggle against poverty. Among them are the equal distribution and use of the land as common resource based on the belief that the land belongs to the ancestors and therefore cannot be sold. This proposition, however, is not only undermined by a decrease in acceptance of the ancestor-creed, but also by the fact that multinational corporations keep buying large quantities of land, with little benefit to the people, who have thus lost their most fundamental source of livelihood. Other religiously inspired principles include that of sharing and reciprocity due to the common humanity and shared sacred origin of all. Wealth is perceived as promoting the communal welfare, not as an individual accrual of material goods. As witches are said to punish those who live ostentatiously, hard work, modest living and resource management are encouraged.[19] Yet through encounters with other systems of value, the concept of poverty is changing in Africa along with the traditional support system. "One can discern a progressive decline in traditional support systems in African societies because of the alien emphasis on

[16] *Ehia wu a nnwu*.
[17] *Chia wu a wurwe aberekyi were*.
[18] Paris, *Religion and Poverty*, 14.
[19] H.W. Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study of the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, Accra: Presbyterian Book Depot, 1959.

competition, individualism, acquisitiveness, consumerism, and self-assertiveness, all of which undermine the values and ideas of traditional economic, social, and religious systems."[20] Are then the traditional coping mechanisms with regards to poverty alleviation doomed to failure? Not quite yet. Throughout Africa, one can encounter remnants of the traditional ways of dealing with poverty by regarding it primarily as a communal, not an individual problem. Kenya's tradition of *harambee* – a community's coming together to support those among them who are in need – is just one example.

For now, we can sum up that even today – and despite their individual differences – African world-views with their conceptions of self, other, and world continue to be deeply influenced by religion as an all-encompassing category, which is a determining factor also in the perception of poverty.

3. Religion and Poverty Alleviation: The Example of the So-Called "Prosperity Gospel"

The call for the inclusion of the religious dimension in poverty alleviation is supported by current developments in sociological-religious studies. After decades of the almost uncontested domination of Max Weber's pronouncement of a "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*), in "more recent years we have witnessed a renewed interest in questions of religiosity and its role in the making of 'modern' society."[21] In this regard, religion sociologist Peter L. Berger even speaks of a "desecularization of the world."[22] This trend has started to become visible also in development and poverty alleviation theory and practice. With the irrelevance of religion as its paradigm for much of the past decades, anthropologist Dena Freeman now

[20] Amoah, 125.
[21] N. Long, 'Foreword,' in: D. Freeman (ed.), *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, vii.
[22] P.L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing 1999. In the same vein, anthropologist Simon Coleman speaks of a "religious revival." S. Coleman, *The Globalization of Charismatic Christianity. Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, 16.

observes "a return to the question of religion and a huge surge of interest in the role of religion in development."[23]

With traditional religions receding in Africa, a new factor has emerged, particularly in the predominantly Christian countries of Central and Southern Africa:[24] Pentecostalism and the so-called "Prosperity Gospel." Prosperity Gospel, in short, is "the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the 'sowing of seeds' through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings."[25] The remarkable rise of prosperity teaching around the world in general and in Africa in particular leads Nigerian theologian George O. Folarin to declare: "Whatever one's attitude to the gospel (and many people do not like it), it cannot be ignored."[26]

While the Prosperity Gospel is found across denominations, it is particularly at home in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches. These churches emphasize the experience and emotion-related dimensions of Christian faith, expressed in a "new life" as "born-agains" after conversion. When Christianity came to Africa and with it the particular brand of Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel, the latter could tie in with many elements of traditional religions, such as the belief in spirits, in healings, in exorcisms, etc.[27] Yet instead of merely fitting "with certain key African sensibilities" and "acknowledging the existence and power of spirits and demons, [Pentecostalism] simultaneously provides a route for believers to distance themselves

[23]Freeman, 1. Cf. also S. Deneulin, *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script*, London: Zed Books 2009; G. Ter Haar and S. Ellis, 'The Role of Religion in Development: Towards a New Relationship between the European Union and Africa,' *European Journal of Development Research* 18.3 (2006), 351-367; E. Tomalin, 'Faith and Development,' in: V. Desai and R. Potter (eds.), *Companion to Development Studies*, London: Hodder Education 2008.

[24] While the countries of Northern Africa, Western Africa and the coastal regions of East Africa are mostly dominated by Islam, Christianity is the prevalent religion in the countries of Central and Southern Africa.

[25] 'Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel,' *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34.3 (2010), 99-102, 99.

[26] G.O. Folarin, 'Contemporary State of the Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria,' *The Asia Journal of Theology* 21.1 (2007), 69-95, 73. For a detailed analysis of the spread of Prosperity Gospel from an ethnographic point of view cf. Coleman, *The globalization of charismatic Christianity*.

[27] This leads Folarin to conclude that the "solutions (especially to sickness and demon oppression)" offered by Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in particular "emerged from within African" rather than having been introduced from the West, America in particular. Folarin, 70.

from them – to make a break – and it is in this that it has its particular appeal."[28] This dialectic relationship to key African concepts – partly viewed critically by other Christian denominations[29] –, along with other features such as the importance of charisma and ecstasy plus the effective use of the new media,[30] help explain the "phenomenal rise of prosperity teaching."[31]

The remarkable expansion of the Prosperity Gospel is best understood against the background of a major economic crisis in Africa in the 1980s/1990s.[32] During this time, particularly Pentecostal theologians radically redefined their view on "worldly things." Instead of perceiving of poverty as a spiritual virtue, material riches now become the hallmark of God's blessings.[33] Dynamic church leaders such as the late Nigerian Archbishop Benson A. Idahosa became formative teachers for an entire generation of pastors, many of them establishing churches and mega-churches. The Gospel of Prosperity, though found throughout Africa, is particularly an urban phenomenon, with young middle class citizens as average members.[34]

In his detailed case study of selected theological schools and congregations in Nigeria – "the microcosm of Africa as a whole"[35] –, Folarin defines three main characteristics of the Prosperity Gospel: The promises to deliver (1.) from poverty (2.) from sickness and (3.) from demon

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[28] Freeman, 22f.

[29] "*[I] seems clear that there are many aspects of Prosperity Teaching that have their roots in that soil [i.e. African primal or traditional religion and its practices]. We therefore wonder if much popular Christianity is a syncretized super-structure on an underlying worldview that has not been radically transformed by the biblical gospel. We also wonder whether the popularity and attraction of Prosperity Teaching is an indication of the failure of contextualization of the gospel in Africa*." Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel, Art. 7, 101.

[30] Freeman, 23.

[31] Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel, 99.

[32] Cf. Heuser, 157f. Lovemore Togarasei calls this "new wave of churches that began in the 1970s and have been a common feature of African Christianity since the 1990s … modern Pentecostals." L. Togarasi, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty: An Appraisal,' *Exchange* 40 (2011) 336-350, 338.

[33] There are elements of continuity as well, however. In her exploration of the historical background with regards to Christian mission and poverty alleviation, Mombo points to four aspects of the missionaries' strategies: evangelism, health and medical work, education and industrial training. "Across Africa these were ways that the mission societies used to help people alleviate poverty, as it was seen then." Mombo, 215. She criticizes, however, that there was no room for African culture and history: "Anything that had existed before was considered valueless to the needs of the African society of the time. Africans, unlike other human beings, were prevented from modernizing from a basis of their own culture." Ibid.

[34] Togarasei, 338. Cf. Heuser, 163.

[35] Folarin, 69.

possession.[36] While all elements are interrelated, the first aspect will be treated more extensively as it is of special relevance in this context

1. Deliverance from poverty. Tanzanian preacher Stephen Lotasaruaki aptly summarizes this most fundamental aspect of the Gospel of Prosperity: *Si mapenzi ya Mungu tuwe maskini* ("It is not God's will for us to be poor").[37] Here, one needs to keep in mind the transcendental perspective rooted deeply in traditional African religions, now mirrored in the Prosperity Gospel. Both attribute poverty to "the evil ones."[38] It is therefore necessary to cast out the "spirit of poverty."[39] The Gospel of Prosperity offers a threefold solution.[40] *First*, knowledge, i.e. Christians need to know what their rights are as "children of God." *Second*, faith, i.e. Christians must believe God's promises. And *third*, testimony, i.e. Christians must testify to the fact that God gives them what they need. This last aspect of "positive confession" is of particular importance here and refers to the belief that what you say is what you get. These three elements are supplemented by an emphasis on hard work. Christians are encouraged to work diligently, resulting in what theologian David Maxwell describes as "penny capitalism."[41] This includes the strong promotion of self-employment as a more sustainable way of subsistence compared to working as an employee or day laborer. Deliverance of poverty further includes the principle of "sowing and reaping." "Giving to the church [i.e. sowing seeds of prosperity] is equated to giving to God, so the measure you give is the measure you will get back. The churches therefore receive huge sums of money from members who expect financial and health breakthroughs in their lives in return."[42]

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[36] Folarin names the promise to deliver from sin as a fourth characteristic. This aspect, however, is far less emphasized than the other three elements. Cf. Table 4: Primary Emphases of Selected Denominations, Folarin, 76f.
[37] Vgl. S. Loilang'isho Lotasaruaki, *Si mapenzi ya Mungu tuwe maskini*, Arusha 2006.
[38] Folarin, 81.
[39] Togarasei, 340.
[40] K. Davis, 'Das Wohlstandsevangelium in der tansanischen Pfingstbewegung,' *Freikirchen Forschung* 19 (2010), 202-209, 203.
[41] D. Maxwell, 'Delivered From the Spirit of Poverty? Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe,' *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28.3 (1998), 350-374.
[42] Togarasei, 340.

Ad (2.) Deliverance from sickness. Again, one needs to keep in mind the spiritual worldview spread by traditional African religions. Sickness is generally attributed less to physical than to metaphysical sources. Evil spirits that cause poverty are equally responsible for generating diseases and ailments. If one combines this specific understanding of the roots of sickness with the concrete situation in most African countries "where medical facilities are inadequate, cost of treatment is high, and the generality of her citizens are poor" it becomes plausible that "the gospel of healing would … attract large followings."[43]

Ad (3.) Deliverance from demons. Here, the interrelatedness of all three aspects of the Prosperity Gospel's promise for deliverance becomes apparent as well as their resemblance of key aspects of traditional African religions. If evil spirits are responsible for making people both poor and sick, then deliverance from these demons must be made a priority. The Prosperity Gospel takes up this omnipresent fear and promises redemption.

It is not the object of this paper to offer a detailed critical assessment of the Prosperity Gospel. Though much can be said in terms of critique, the questions of interest here are: Does the promise of the Prosperity Gospel to provide deliverance from poverty have any impact on the perception of the phenomenon of poverty? Does it result in any concrete contributions to poverty alleviation? If so, what are their merits/demerits? In the following, I will argue with Botswana theologian Lovemore Togarasei "that the gospel of prosperity is contributing, and has the potential to contribute, to poverty alleviation in Africa."[44] The following case study will serve to illustrate this claim.

3.1 Case Study 1: Efatha Church: "Think like a winner and you will be one"[45] (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania)

[43] Folarin, 84.
[44] Togarasei, 344.
[45] P. Hasu, 'Prosperity Gospels and Enchanted Worldviews: Two Responses to Socio-economic Transformation in Tanzanian Pentecostal Christianity," in: D. Freeman (ed.), *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, 67-86, 75.

Efatha Church in Dar es Salaam was founded by Josephat Elias Mwingira, who claims to have received a nine-point program by God including the assignments to found a Bible school, to teach the word of God, and to heal. He was further to found an education system, from nursery to university level, to start hospitals, and media services. This was in 1992. In 1997, Mwingira officially registered his church, by 2007, he had over 300,000 followers in Tanzania, plus several churches in Kenya, Zambia and Malawi, and his churches continue to grow. Meanwhile, Mwingira has launched his own TV station, a bank, a newspaper and is currently planning to set up a radio station, thus spreading his message even further. His next goals include a hospital, a university and an airport. It is significant to note that Efatha receives no foreign support, but is entirely self-financed and self-sustained. "The principle of giving in order to receive is of supreme importance at this church,"[46] allowing for the weekly tithes and collections to reach up to US$ 30,000. Prosperity, hard work, and self-reliance are central themes at Efatha; themes Mwingira deepens by offering seminars on economic issues. The sermons preached at Efatha point to a "new story in Africa:" "The inferiority complex must change. … As God created so will you create; new companies, businesses, investments, franchises! … To save and to invest are the two important principles of prosperity. … Break the fear, be bold, be strong, stand out for God and see Him do mighty things for you!"[47] Combining religion and entrepreneurship, Mwingira's message of prosperity appeals mostly to upper middle-class urban people, most of which own small to middle-size businesses, and to those seeking upward social mobility.

The case study of Efatha Church demonstrates how the Prosperity Gospel works on several levels.

The first concerns the *level of theological perception of poverty*. If poverty is primarily seen as a Christian virtue, it is something to be striven for, much less avoided. Accordingly, there is little incentive to work for material improvement as historian Kossi Ayedze from the Republic

[46] Hasu, 74.
[47] Hasu, 76f.

of Togo points out: "Moneymaking was regarded as morally and religiously dangerous. The notion that the rich person could only with difficulty please God thus found its way into consciences and continues to impact the lives of many Christians in Africa."[48] Against this perception, Efatha sets the claim that God wants Africans to be rich, to own businesses, investments, etc. Once Christian theology has started to interpret material goods less as a hindrance to the kingdom of God and more as a resource for doing good, immense motivational capacities for change are released.

On the *level of social perception of poverty*, the Prosperity Gospel can function as one element in the African struggle against a seemingly all-pervasive "Afro-pessimism."[49] "The most important contribution to poverty alleviation made by the gospel of prosperity is the positive mindset it gives to believers."[50] By giving "hope to the hopeless" and by enforcing "positive thinking,"[51] it participates in countering Afro-pessimism with "Afro-optimism"[52] and "Afro-responsibility."[53] The latter are further strengthened by the Prosperity Gospel's emphasis on hard work, diligence, and individual responsibility, clearly a fundamental component at Efatha. According to a representative study of members of Pentecostal churches in South Africa, these members feel "less powerless, have less fear about the future and are more willing to accept social change" than their peers in a non-Pentecostal context.[54] A heightened sense of self-

[48] For a critical analysis of a one-sided emphasis of poverty as spiritual virtue and its lasting detrimental social consequences, cf. K.A. Ayedze, 'Poverty Among African People and the Ambiguous Role of Christian Thought,' in: P.J. Paris (ed.), *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives*, Durham: Duke University Press 2009, 193-212, 208.

[49] Vgl. R. Tetzlaff, 'Armutsminderung in der Dritten Welt: Moralische Verpflichtung oder politische Illusion?' in: T. Hanf, H.N. Weiler, and H. Dickow (eds.), *Entwicklung als Beruf (FS P. Molt)*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2009, 473-484.

[50] Togarasei, 347.

[51] Folarin, 89.

[52]Togarasei, 347. Others have cautioned that the Prosperity Gospel is an "impetus for delusion" rather than a "medium for social transformation." Cf. A.O. Dada, 'Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian Context: A Medium of Social Transformation or an Impetus for Delusion?,' *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 36.1 & 2 (2004), 95-105.

[53]R. Tetzlaff, 'Armutsminderung in der Dritten Welt: Moralische Verpflichtung oder politische Illusion?,' in: T. Hanf, T., H.N. Weiler, and H. Dickow (eds.), *Entwicklung als Beruf (FS P. Molt)*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2009, 473-484, 482f. Cf. Heuser, 171.

[54] H. Dickow, *Religion and Attitudes towards Life in South Africa: Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Reborns*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2012, 193.

confidence and self-reliance helps to no longer accept poverty as an inevitable fate, but rather as a challenge that can be met.[55]

Regarding the *level of concrete actions* aimed at poverty alleviation, the answers are multi-facetted. One area is the encouragement of entrepreneurship, displayed at Efatha through its messages and the economics seminars offered. As Mombo points out: "Nothing is more effective in alleviating poverty than giving individuals the chance to create small businesses."[56] In the African context, where unemployment is rampant and a major factor in the negative spiral leading into abject poverty, the teachings on self-employment are of great significance in battling poverty. A number of leading Pentecostal churches have initiated business fellowships to encourage and facilitate entrepreneurship, while they also create employment opportunities for the public within their own administrations, schools, hospitals, projects, etc.[57] Freeman draws attention to another aspect, playing into the realm of morality: "With alcohol consumption, smoking and extramarital relations cast as immoral, many Pentecostal men are effectively 'domesticated' and they turn the focus of their energy and resources to their family."[58] Due to the Prosperity Gospel's teaching on giving and sharing, believers are furthermore sensitized to the needs of the even less fortunate. Many churches are therefore engaged in social projects such as feeding the poor, initiatives for alphabetizing, support of the elderly and of victims of rape and AIDS.[59] The array of projects and actions inspired by the Prosperity Gospel and aimed directly or indirectly at the alleviation of poverty seems quite

[55] Regarding the church communities, it is significant to note that in Tanzania – while the Lutheran Church of Tanzania (ELCT) still relies on international donors for a significant portion of its budget – Pentecostal churches have reached a far higher level of independence. "Due to the Prosperity Gospel's emphases on tithing, hard work, and the leading of an orderly life, Pentecostal churches are able to independently finance church buildings and initiate social projects." Davis, 208f.

[56] Mombo, 221.

[57] Examples are the "Africa Christian Business Fellowship" of *ZAOGA* in Zimbabwe and the "Mighty Men's Project and Investments Desk" of *FOG*. Cf. Togarasei, 346.

[58] Freeman, 13.

[59] Cf. the example of the *Grace Bible Church* in Soweto, South Africa. E.M.K. Mathole, 'Beyond Common Stereotypes about the Pentecostal-Charismatic Evangelicals in South Africa,' in: H. Dickow and A. Heuser (eds.), *Religion on the Move: Exploring Passages in South African Christianity* (Lettres de Byblos/Letters from Byblos No. 23, UNESCO International Centre of Human Sciences), Beirut: Byblos 2008, 59-75.

impressive. We can therefore conclude with theologian Andreas Heuser: "Poverty alleviation has meanwhile become an integral part of the self-perception of the Pentecostal Movement."[60] On an analytical level, the degree of proximity between Pentecostalism and development can be described with anthropologist Rijk van Dijk as the collapse of "the analytical distinction between religion and development"[61] in the study of Pentecostalism, for the churches themselves provide the tools for personal and communal development as well as for economic growth.

Yet in how far are these measures effective, particularly in view of a broadly based and sustainable poverty alleviation? Here, we encounter a mixed picture. While there are indicators for effective poverty alleviation on the local level, the following three factors are hindering sustainable poverty alleviation on a larger scale. *First*, most church-initiated social projects and actions are aimed primarily at their immediate social surroundings.[62] While at best improving the life of their own members and those in their close vicinities, those beyond are usually not targeted. *Second*, case studies indicate that Pentecostal churches tend to be suspicious concerning cooperation outside their churches.[63] Collaboration with NGOs, governments or even other denominations is oftentimes marginal, [64] thus preventing synergetic effects achieved by joint effort. "In short, there is no lack of social engagement. There is a lack, however, of the institutionalized routine required for the efficient implementation of social projects."[65] *Third*, the Gospel of Prosperity has been repeatedly – and rightfully – criticized for its lack of attention to the structural causes of poverty, injustices such as gender inequality, unfair international trade practices, exploitation, etc. The "political irrelevance"[66] of the Prosperity Gospel and its

[60] Heuser, 167.
[61] van Dijk, 88.
[62] Heuser, 167.
[63] Dickow, 193.
[64] With regards to Cameroon, Gifford describes how „Catholics and Protestants are seldom in contact with each other. … [E]ven among the Protestant churches themselves there is little cooperation." Gifford, 299.
[65] Heuser, 167.
[66] W. Richards, 'An Examination of Common Factors in the Growth of Global Pentecostalism: Observed in South Korea, Nigeria and Argentina,' *Journal of Asia Missions* 7.1 (2005), 85-106, 98.

failure to critically address socio-political problems such as corruption, election fraud, and ethnic conflicts seriously undermines its effectiveness concerning sustainable development and poverty alleviation.

Despite these shortcomings, the religious factor in general, and the Prosperity Gospel in particular, have nevertheless emerged as a significant contributor in dealing with the phenomenon of poverty in Africa. Freeman goes well beyond this claim and argues that "Pentecostal churches are often rather more effective change agents than are development NGOs."[67] With growing disillusionment regarding the achievements of NGOs that have often been far from successful in generating local participation and empowering the poor,[68] Pentecostal churches focus on key concepts of change oftentimes neglected by secular NGOs. This contention is exemplified by the following case study.

3.2 Case Study 2: Oledai Church: Imparting Meaning after Violence (Teso, Uganda)

While case study 1 presents the narrative of a wealthy mega-church related to the Prosperity Gospel, case study 2 looks at an entirely different context, thereby illustrating Maxwell's differentiation of African Pentecostalism between a prosperity-focused urban Pentecostalism on the one hand and a healing-focused Pentecostalism in rural areas on the other hand.[69] The church in question is located in the village of Oledai, Uganda. Two aspects are of particular interest here: *First*, the contributions of Pentecostalism beyond monetary prosperity, in this specific case breaking with the past, holistic healing, and order, after a violent insurgency shook the area between 1986 and 1993. *Second*, similarities and differences between this church and NGOs, well observable here since both were at work in the same place at the same time.

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[67] Freeman, 3.
[68] Cf. B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds.), *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books 2001.
[69] D. Maxwell, 'Post-Colonial Christianity in Africa,' in: H. McCleod (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, *Vol. 9: World Christianities c. 1914-c.2000*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006.

Against the background of recent violence and chaos, Oledai PAG Church,[70] established in 1994, deals with both spiritual and practical concerns. It emphasizes the need for personal transformation, for a "break with the past," and for moral rules such as the prohibition of alcohol, cigarettes or adultery, thus offering both order and hope for a new beginning to a traumatized people. Oledai Church engages its members by offering weekly activities such as choir, bible study groups, students' groups, etc. After the violence ended, NGOs – well funded by the NUSAF[71] – also moved in, aiming to "empower communities … by enhancing their capacity to systematically identify, prioritise, and plan for their needs and implement sustainable development initiatives."[72] They initiated eleven different committees or community management structures such as Farmer Groups, Hygiene Working Groups, Water Source Committees, etc. Ten years later, the NGOs were gone, the committees dissipated. Oledai Church, however, was humbly flourishing, their formerly grass-thatched structure now displaying brick walls and an iron roof, four times the size it used to be. How is the difference in impact and sustainability to be explained? According to anthropologist Ben Jones, the main criterion is meaning. While Oledai Church has managed to engage the hearts and minds of its members and to become part of the community, the "work of community development has mostly technical functions and represents an ideological agenda – of rights, empowerment or participation – that had little purchase. In a fundamental way the work of NGOs lacked meaning."[73] Though well-intentioned and well-funded, the NGOs remained extrinsic to the community, not being able to connect on a deeper level to the people they had meant to help.

I would like to utilize the cases of both Oledai Church and Efatha Church to illuminate Freeman's thesis of ranking Pentecostal churches before NGOs as agents of sustainable and effective change. Freeman puts forth four main arguments in support of her claim. *First*,

[70] Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) is a relatively conservative branch of Pentecostalism.
[71] US$ 233 million World-Bank-funded Northern Uganda Social Action Fund.
[72] J. Manor, *Aid That Works: Successful Development in Fragile States*, Washington, DC: World Bank 2007, 264.
[73] B. Jones, 'Pentecostalism, Development NGOs and Meaning,' in: D. Freeman (ed.), *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, 181-202, 200.

"although Pentecostal churches and secular NGOs both exist within a market logic, their funding sources are considerably different and this leads to some highly significant differences in their modes of operation and accountability."[74] As has been seen in both case studies, both Oledai Church and Efatha Church are entirely self-funded, contrary to NGOs, who commonly receive their funding from external sources, such as foreign governments or international donors. Oledai Church and Efatha Church are therefore accountable to their own congregation members, while the NGOs' accountability is directed to their foreign donors. *Second*, "Pentecostal churches focus on transforming individual subjectivities."[75] Not least due to their emphasis on conversion or "being born again," Pentecostal churches foster new behavioral patterns, thereby encouraging economic improvement and positive changes in social status. While both Efatha Church and Oledai Church emphasize a "break with the past" visible in personal and social conduct, NGOs lack devices for personal transformation. Religious scientist Paul Gifford points into the same direction when he refers to "the element of intensity or seriousness" that is characteristic of Pentecostalism.[76] *Third*, "Pentecostal churches are rather better than NGOs at fostering participation."[77] With their numerous weekly activities offered, both Efatha Church and Oledai Church strive to actively involve their members to the point that they feel "at home" in their churches. NGOs on the other hand often fail in achieving these kinds of processes of identification, thus remaining on the periphery of individual and communal identity. The *fourth* reason concerns "the way that Pentecostalism and secular development ideologies relate to the past and to traditional African religions and cultural practices."[78] While secular NGOs mostly ignore the religious fabric of much of African reality, Pentecostalism engages with this prominent feature of African life, including spirits, demons,

[74] Freeman, 24.
[75] Freeman, 25.
[76] As an example of personal transformation accompanying the elements of intensity and seriousness, he points to Ugandan Pentecostal churches engagement against AIDS and their call to abstain from pre-marital sex and adultery. P. Gifford, *African Christianity. Its Public Role*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1998, 169f.
[77] Freeman, 25.
[78] Freeman, 26.

or miracles. Pentecostalism not only incorporates traditional social and cultural forms, but also offers paths to transform them. The sermons preached at Efatha on a new African self-confidence are as much in this vein as are the activities at Oledai aimed at offering holistic healing and stability to the traumatized. Yet rather than pinning one form of development against the other, religious against secular, best results are reached, when both are joining forces. It is in their mutual cooperation that the "the overall potential for change is phenomenal."[79]

From the insights gained so far emerges the necessity for the development of what can be called a "holistic-contextualized" approach to poverty alleviation. Two factors in particular need to be incorporated in what shall be presented as a tentative sketch.

4. Proposal: A Holistic-Contextualized Approach to Poverty Alleviation

The necessity of context-sensitivity as prerequisite for the sustainability of poverty alleviation is meanwhile accepted as consensus in poverty alleviation theory. Mombo emphasizes the importance of the specific context in her analysis of the African "poverty-trap": "Africa has been trying to develop herself out of wrong and inappropriate experience of Europe, rather than drawing on her own history and culture to benefit her people."[80] Two consequences emerge from this proposition. *First*, the premise of any ensuing effort directed at poverty alleviation must be a contextualized understanding of the meaning of poverty. *Second*, in the case of Africa, poverty alleviation entails the consideration of the religious factor.

Ad (1.). *A contextualized conception of poverty*. While recent approaches on poverty measurement have moved beyond single indicator poverty measurement such as material

[79] Freeman, 26. For an example of successful cooperation of a Pentecostal church with a development NGO, cf. Freeman's account 'Development and the Rural Entrepreneur: Pentecostals, NGOs and the Market in the Gamo Highlands, Ethiopia,' in: D. Freeman (ed.), *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, 159-180.

[80] Mombo, 220, 224.

possessions and strive to take other factors, for instance in terms of exclusion or capabilities, into account,[81] the African perspective nevertheless reveals a particular sensitivity to social *and* religious dimensions. "Consequently, those who live in a family that is related to a larger community often do not think of themselves as being poor in spite of their lack of material resources."[82] Truly poor by African standards are, as Paris emphasizes, for instance, the "countless number of orphaned children on the streets of many African cities [due to the] *combination of material, familial, and spiritual impoverishment*."[83] In Paris' description, a contextualized notion of poverty shines through that addresses the factor of material needs, yet also encompasses social and religious resources. Without diminishing the importance of sufficient material means, we are pointed here towards a contextualized understanding of poverty that incorporates, yet transcends many Western definitions, including the standard UN-definition of poverty as living on less than 1.25 USD per day.[84]

Ad (2.) *The religious factor in poverty alleviation*. "Because they are symbols which act to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in human beings, religious teachings have human consequences. They help or hurt people, strengthen or weaken them, advance or diminish their quality of life."[85] The "human consequences" Ayedze is referring to, include attitudes towards poverty. Tracing the negative social influences of a one-sided Christian teaching that emphasized the value of poverty and thus weakened efforts in poverty alleviation, Ayedze makes it clear that adequate "Christian … teachings on wealth and poverty" could play an equally significant, positive role in this endeavor, and even

[81] Cf., for example, the work of Sabina Alkire or the "Capability Approach" of Amartya Sen. S. Alkire, *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis: A Counting Approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014. For a good introduction into Sen's Capability Approach see: A. Sen, 'Capability and Well-Being,' in: D.M. Hausman (ed.), *The Philosophy of Economics. An Anthology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008, 270-293. For the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, cf. N. Kakwani and J. Silber (eds.), *The Many Dimensions of Poverty*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2007. For the relationship of development and wellbeing, cf. I. Gough and J.A. McGregor (eds.), *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007.

[82] Paris, *Religion and Poverty*, 14.

[83] Paris, *Religion and Poverty*, 14f. My Emphasis.

[84] Cf. http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview. Last access September 25, 2014.

[85] Ayedze, 207.

"unequivocally be the starting point in our efforts to alleviate poverty among African people".[86] Particularly in areas, where religious faith is a common denominator among the people, its influence on poverty alleviation cannot be ignored.[87] "And religious institutions are, of course, a key part of civil society, being the most prevalent form of associational life in Africa today."[88] With regards to South Africa, where "the church is the strongest and most influential non-governmental organization,"[89] a study supported by the National Research Foundation states: "[W]e are positive that churches have the potential to influence the process of reduction of poverty in South Africa."[90]

From this follows that joint endeavors between the religious sphere and other players such as governments, NGOs, the World Bank, etc. are called for. Development economist Hermann Sautter supports this conclusion: "Oftentimes, institutions of NGOs such as churches are the only ones that are accessible to the underprivileged sectors of the population and that can contribute directly to poverty alleviation. In such cases, governmental development cooperation is well advised to support these existing private structures."[91] Since the early 2000s, this need has been increasingly seen and taken up, resulting in the World Faiths Development Dialogue. This network of "development institutions, including the World Bank, several national aid programmes and key non-governmental organisations … various world faiths and religious

[86] Ayedze, 209. South African human ecologist Grace Nkomo who explores the effects of different theologies on the perception and attitudes towards poverty supports this finding: "The churches that … had the most church-led initiatives had a very clearly articulated theology of the poor." G. Nkomo and N.F. Bowers du Toit, 'The Ongoing Challenge of Restorative Justice in South Africa: How and Why Wealthy Suburban Congregations are Responding to Poverty and Inequality,' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70.2 (2014), 1-8, 7. http://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/86166. Last access September 25, 2014.

[87] This holds also true for Western countries like the US. In her study of black megachurches in the US and their engagement against poverty and AIDS, Sandra Barnes concludes, "poverty is a problem to be attacked collectively and individually; spiritual motivation, godly favor and presumed victory render it yet another challenge that can be potentially overcome." S.L. Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper. How Black Megachurches Address HIV/AIDS and Poverty in the Age of Prosperity Gospel*, New York: Fordham University Press 2013, 180.

[88] Freeman, 2. Gifford characterizes churches as "the leading institutions of civil society." Gifford, 299.

[89] J.C. Erasmus, H.J. Hendriks, and G.G. Mans, 'Religious Research as Kingpin in the Fight Against Poverty and AIDS in the Western Cape, South Africa,' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 62.1 (2006), 293-311, 306.

[90] Erasmus et al., 306.

[91] H. Sutter, 'Armutsminderung in Afrika – kein hoffnungsloser Fall. Von den Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit,' in: A. Kusch and T. Schirrmacher (eds.), *Der Kampf gegen die weltweite Armut – Aufgabe der Evangelischen Allianz? Zur biblisch-theologischen Begründung der Micha-Initiative*, Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft 2009, 65-78, 78.

organisations [explores] common ground between 'secular' and 'faith-based' modes of development thinking and practice."[92] The joint declaration issued by the World Bank and the Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa (CAPA), stating their intention of future collaboration, is one example of such cooperation.[93] However, despite these promising examples demonstrating the fact that the goals expressed in the Millennium Declaration depend on the united efforts of all involved in poverty alleviation, "most development organizations are still a long way away from having processed the religious dimension and integrated it into their operational procedures".[94] Given the plausibility that religiously influenced world-views assume for many people in the African context, these resources in the battle against poverty must no longer be ignored. While an "increasing appreciation for the importance of non-material matters – such as beliefs, values and morality – in the development process"[95] in recent year is laudable, it is not enough. Clearly, a paradigm shift has become necessary.

In order to sum up, I argued, *first*, that even today, the holistic, spiritual world-view characteristic of traditional African religions is deeply engrained in the African consciousness and perception of self, other, and the world, and accordingly, of poverty. *Second*, I utilized the example of a rather recent religious phenomenon, Pentecostalism and, particularly, the Prosperity Gospel, to explore the presumed relationship of religion and poverty, with specific attention being paid to poverty alleviation. This resulted in the observation that the Prosperity Gospel does indeed have a positive effect on poverty alleviation. Not only does it serve to strengthen a much-needed "Afro-optimism" and "Afro-responsibility," but it also engages in concrete, though mostly locally limited projects directed against poverty. The point has been

[92] Long, vii.
[93] "The World Bank can work with the church to assess the impact of programmes of both institutions that are targeted to this group and to enable men and women to work together in mutually supportive partnership in the home and the community." Joint conference by the CAPA and the World Bank, 6-10 March 2000 in Nairobi, Kenya. Cited in Mombo, 224.
[94] E. Imhof, *Entwicklungszusammenarbeit und Religion. Fallstudie und ethische Reflexion zu einem angespannten Verhältnis*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2012, 17.
[95] Freeman, 1, with reference to Gough and McCregor.

made that Pentecostal churches can parallel and even exceed secular NGOs as effective change agents. From the insights gained emerged, *third*, the necessity to develop a "holistic-contextualized approach" to poverty alleviation. This approach is characterized by the inclusion of the following two aspects: a contextualized conception of poverty and the religious factor in poverty alleviation. It calls for utilizing the resources present in religion-based approaches to poverty alleviation by combining them with other strategies. Context-sensitive and thus sustainable poverty alleviation depends on the successful integration of all relevant players, including a long neglected player: the religious factor.